

## Relaxation Ideas for the 5-a-Day Challenge

### Eight Ways to Beat Stress

By Bobbie Lieberman

What is relaxation? The mystics say it is to completely "lose yourself" or to "be in flow" in your activity, so that all internal "chatter" is stilled. Modern-day researchers have linked relaxation to a marked slowing of brain waves accompanied by clarity that is called "the awakened mind."

But how do we achieve this admirable state, and how can we maintain it over time? Let's explore some of the ways that you can quiet your mind, melt away stress and approach relaxation of the body, mind and spirit:

**Spend some time in the silence every day.** In our high-tech world, we are surrounded by and immersed in information—streaming in via television, e-mail, voice mail, fax machines and pagers. Information overload can become a detriment to your health, knocking you off balance and creating a sort of artificial dependence upon these stimulations. So make time for yourself, and take a break from the info-stream every day.

**Reconnecting with stillness is an important component of health.** Every day, devote a little time to take yourself out of the "busyness" game. First, eliminate all forms of intrusion. Then close your eyes, breathe deeply and let your thoughts float downstream like a log carried by the river. You can practice meditation or relax in a hot bath with aromatherapy. When a thought comes up, just watch it float away.

**Don't buy into the cultural definition of "news."** Andrew Weil, M.D., recommends taking a voluntary "news blackout" on a regular basis—stop reading the newspaper and watching television for one day, a week or longer. A constant supply of "bad news" isn't healthy for our bodies—our cells are designed to take in joy, not disaster!

**Pursue your passion.** Activities that absorb you completely will slow your brain waves and put you into that "zone" in which internal chatter is stilled. It could be bird-watching, cooking, hiking, biking or riding, painting, writing, sewing, gardening, photography, working with animals. Physical movement is important—it opens the chest, lifts your mood, curbs food cravings and lowers blood pressure. You'll also sleep better at night.

**Practice the "Relaxation Response."** Herbert Benson, M.D., Harvard researcher and author of *The Relaxation Response* and *Timeless Healing*, says, "Faith quiets the mind like no other form of belief." Here's the technique: Repeat a simple, neutral word such as "one" for several minutes. Then close your eyes, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, as you say your word or phrase silently as you exhale. When stray thoughts come by, gently release them and continue repeating your phrase. Do this deep breathing exercise for 10 to 15 minutes each day.

**Treat yourself to a massage or other type of bodywork.** Doing so on a regular basis can help to lower your heart rate and blood pressure and promote muscle relaxation and emotional release. According to Stephen Sinatra, M.D., author of *Heart Sense for Women*, "It's not uncommon for the release of long-held sadness to occur as a result of bodywork."

**Let the tears flow.** Crying can be very therapeutic. According to Sinatra, "Crying is one of the most cleansing experiences you can go through." Here's why: Deep sobs open the chest and diaphragm, releasing bound-up energy. This helps to free your heart of muscular tension. A good cry also enhances oxygen delivery to the cells and stimulates release of specific neurochemicals in the brain that promote relaxation.

**Laugh.** Rent a classic comedy film, or tune in to "Nick at Nite" or the Comedy Channel. Rent a tape of your favorite comedian. Read some of those Internet joke lists that you've been archiving to "read later." Dig out your old "Far Side" cartoon collections. Clip a cartoon and post it on the refrigerator or fax it to a friend, to double the effect.

